

# Detained and Dehumanised: The impact of immigration detention

*“Going into detention, I felt terrible, de-humanised. I had nobody, no voice. I felt so much hatred for people like me”.*

Every year, the UK government detains thousands of people in prison-like conditions for the purpose of immigration control. It does so indefinitely, via an administrative procedure.

JRS UK supports people with experience of immigration detention in two contexts: through detention visiting at Heathrow Immigration Removal Centre (IRC), where we provide pastoral support and non-legal casework to anyone detained there; and in the community, where we work with people made destitute by the asylum process, who are struggling to gain recognition as refugees. We wanted to understand how those we worked with experienced detention, and the impact that detention had on their lives. We also wanted to listen to people with direct experience of detention – people who saw it and understood it from the inside. To do this, we listened to refused asylum seekers who had been detained, and others at risk of detention.<sup>1</sup> What we heard was harrowing.

**Detention has a deep and lasting impact on the person;** on mental and physical health, on the way one interacts with the world, and on sense of self and of one’s humanity. Its trauma stretches beyond the period of detention, to be re-lived indefinitely over the years to come. Torture survivors experience detention as torture. They and others spoke of detention as a kind of dying, and indeed detention fosters a culture of death where suicidal ideation is commonplace.

*“I went in detention in my country. I was tortured, persecuted. You took me to detention again.”*

## Key Findings

**A culture of death and self-harm pervades the experience of being detained** – self harm is commonplace and many witnessed suicide attempts.

*“I saw people cutting themselves, someone who tried to hang himself, someone who died in detention...”*

**Even a short period in detention is traumatic; long detention is especially damaging.** Lack of a time limit was felt to be unfair, and people had found it particularly stressful not to know when they would be released.

*“The most awful thing was an uncertainty: Not knowing whether I will be released and what they’re going to do to me.”*

**Detention is harmful to physical and mental health and causes long term trauma.**

*“When I was released it was even difficult for me to cross a road because of mental torture for 7 months.”*

**The process of detention is arbitrary, lacks accountability,** with no meaningful notice and no explanation. Reporting to the Home Office is also experienced in the shadow of detention. The prospect of detention and re-detention creates fear that shapes life long after release, punctuating it more sharply as the time to report approaches.

*“[Reporting] gives me stress, so much stress. Each time I go there, my blood pressure goes very high. I feel dizzy sometimes.”*

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<sup>1</sup> We conducted semi-structured interviews with people registered at our day centre and people we had supported in detention, and placed these alongside earlier structured conversations with people in detention. Altogether, this report draws on accounts and reflections from 27 people with direct experience of detention, and a further 7 who had not been detained but who were liable to detention, and subject to reporting and hostile environment policies.

## Public Policy Recommendations

**The use of immigration detention is incompatible with a humane and just immigration and asylum system.**

### 1. End the use of detention for the purpose of immigration control

Immigration detention is harmful and unjust. The government and Home Office should adopt an alternative system that is proportionate, accountable, and respects the dignity and right to liberty of those subject to immigration control.

*For as long as immigration detention exists, the following steps should urgently be taken to limit it and reduce its negative impact on those detained, and on their families and communities.*

### 2. Introduce a mandatory and short time limit for all those detained under immigration powers

A short time limit would significantly reduce the uncertainty involved in being detained; and it would prevent people being held in detention for months or years. Though even a short period in detention is harmful, both long detention and indefinite detention are especially traumatic. In our interviews, the indefinite nature of detention was contrasted with clear and accountable limits for prison sentences, undermining the integrity of the criminal justice system for those who had entered detention from prison. There is good evidence that the effect of detention on mental health typically increases in detention of over a month. It is relevant in this context that there are tight mandatory time-limits on how long people can be held without charge in other areas of law, 28 days being the longest time allowed in any other context. A time limit of 28 days or less would decrease the arbitrariness of detention and its harm to the person.

### 3. Any decision to detain must go before a judge

For as long as immigration detention is used, the decision to detain must have authoritative oversight independent of the Home Office in which the potential detainee has the opportunity to meaningfully engage. Practices of detaining lack transparency, independent oversight, and procedural justice, contributing to traumatic fear of detention. People feel trapped, even kidnapped, under current practices of detention. Ongoing judicial oversight of continued detention should also be introduced, to ensure that a time limit does not become the typical length of detention, potentially lengthening it for some.

## Take action

*Write to your MP and ask them to support a 28-day time limit on detention*

More information about how to find your MP, and a template letter, are available on JRS UK's website here:

<https://www.jrsuk.net/news/show-your-support-for-ending-indefinite-detention/>

## More information

Read the full report, Dehumanised and Detained here: [www.jrsuk.net/detentionreport](http://www.jrsuk.net/detentionreport) (published 29 June 2020)

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